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Inside: the State Department

The People Who Sell Foreign Policies

The State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean is the closest thing to a collection of traveling foreign policy salesmen that Foggy Bottom has ever had.

Set up in July 1983 with two people chartered to "educate the public" about the Reagan administration's Latin policy, the office now has 19 people who spent \$935,000 last year, preparing documents, traveling around the world and delivering hundreds of speeches, among other things. Top State Department officials say the effort has made a big contribution toward building popular support for U.S. actions in Central America, and as such, it could prove to be the model for building support for other sticky U.S. involvements in other parts of the world.

The budget figure does not include the salaries of the office's eight professional staff members, who are on loan from the Defense Department, the U.S. Information Agency and the Agency for International Development as well as State, according to deputy director John D. Blacken. Neither does it include travel expenses for many of the speeches, which are often paid by the group that requested a speaker—for a college teach-in, a civic club meeting or a local debate, for example.

Instead, the money went for clerical help, for a Wang computer system to keep track of available people and publications, for other travel and for the cost of printing and distributing the mountain of paper the office produces, Blacken said.

Army Col. Larry Tracy, who says he has made 200 speeches in the past 20 months, said the idea for the office grew out of the lessons learned from the U.S. experience in Vietnam. "It was a serious error in Vietnam to have no effort to build popular support for the war," he said. "We could have worked better with the press to produce a more realistic view.

"Public diplomacy is basically a new concept in the way foreign policy is made," he said. "The 'public affairs office' is traditionally reactive to the news. There's never been an office that tries to educate the public the way we do I

would like to see an office like this become a permanent part of the diplomatic process, one for each area of the world."

The office is not subject to the law barring the USIA from disseminating information to Americans.

Blacken, who directed the State Department's Central America office from 1980 to mid-1981, said people misunderstood the region and the policy from the beginning. "It was a real frustration There was no organized way we were trying to explain to people the basic concepts of what Central America was to us and what we were basing our policy on."

Director Otto J. Reich, 39, a Cuban-American who was formerly assistant administrator of AID for Latin America, sees his task as making the best possible case for the administration's Central America policy to reporters, foreign officials and local opinion leaders. He travels frequently to Europe and Central America to meet with officials, sounding them out on their views and arguing in favor of the U.S. position.

Tracy said he prefers to speak to audiences that are hostile or made up of students in order to get a debate going and to find out what people's concerns are. As a result of such listening, he said, the office has given new emphasis to "moral issues" such as why it is proper to back military assaults by rebels against the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua. "Nobody's asking any more which side we're on in El Salvador," he said.

A daily intelligence briefing gives Reich the latest information on Central American developments, and the staffers keep in close touch with the regional desk officers in their respective agencies and with the White House. Reich says he works hard to make public as much of his information as possible.

"A lot of stuff is classified that doesn't need to be. We are really pushing to get it out," he said in a telephone conversation earlier this year.

Reich and Tracy take pains to deny published reports that their office selectively leaks documents boosting the administration's view to chosen reporters. But sometimes

the office will provide documents to friendly organizations, which then leak the papers themselves. One example was a frankly-worded secret report from the Cuban government to its international creditors, which Reich acknowledged he had provided to the Cuban-American National Foundation last May. The foundation "leaked" the document to reporters in June, citing a European banker as its source.

The office's publications are often the product of interagency cooperation engineered by Reich's

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team and monitored for political accuracy. A September report called "Revolution Beyond Our Borders," for example, quotes Sandinista leader Tomas Borge as saying in a 1981 speech: "This revolution goes beyond our borders." But it ignores his next sentence: "This does not mean we export our revolution. It is sufficient that they follow our example"

A glossy-covered report, "The Soviet-Cuban Connection," is at the top of the office's popularity charts so far, with 60,000 copies in circulation, Tracy said. He plans an updated second edition soon.

Asked how his office differs from a lobbying group, Tracy said it focuses on factual information. "What we provide does, of course, have the imprimatur of the U.S. government," he said. "But there's nothing the matter with attempting to generate support for a policy as long as you're truthful."

—Joanne Omang